VALUES - AND THE NEW CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

On February 8, 1994, IDRC organized a development forum entitled "What Role do Values Play in Sustainable Development?". Dr. Keith A. Bezanson, President of IDRC, opened the forum by placing values in the new context of international development. His opening remarks were as follows:

"Mr. Chairman, you stated in your opening comments that there is a reluctance to talk about values. I agree with you. But that is what we are here to talk about today. Let me begin, therefore, by suggesting that the conversation we are going to have today would not have taken place five or three years ago. I know that I would not have said three years ago what I am going to say today.

Why this change? How do we explain this greater willingness to talk today about values -- values in sustainable development? In my view, the change has much to do with a general and growing sentiment in richer countries that something is very seriously wrong, that we no longer have answers to our problems, that we no longer have it all right. We recognize that our material well-being has depended on an unsustainable model; our confidence has been shaken and shaken seriously. This is no small matter. For the better part of 200 years, a large part of the secular faith of western civilization has rested on science and technology as the instruments that would solve all problems, cure all ills and lead us to the promised land.

It is this, I believe, that helps to explain the change, that accounts for a greater willingness to hold a conversation about values. What is involved is a fundamental shift in the secular confidence of the West, in our faith in the inevitability of "progress" through science and technology.

Let me try to relate this directly to sustainable development. For the better part of the last five decades, the post-war period, the "philosophy" and the instruments of international development have derived from and depended upon our Western faith in progress through science and technology. The development model or -- let me use the infamous "p" word "paradigm" -- the development paradigm has been built on an essentially technocratic view of the world. Not surprisingly, therefore, "development" has essentially been a matter of getting the right combination of capital, natural resources, technology and know-how. The underlying assumptions of development were the same as the underlying assumptions of Western progress: that the resources of the earth were unlimited, that human ingenuity to exploit these resources was equally unlimited and that the capacity of the earth to absorb waste products was also infinite.

Thus, it was that all countries were held to be on a single continuum from poor to rich, separated only by the technocratic requirements of moving from poor to rich -- to "catching up with us". This, I submit, has been the essential defining feature of our view of world development for most of the last 50 years. As a result of this, we have thought of development as something we bring to people, as something we do to or for others.

I am not suggesting that the development effort of the past half century was amoral, that it had no values. Quite to the contrary, the effort itself was driven by a strong ethical component which held that justice on a global scale was both desirable and feasible through the cooperation of nations. This being said, however, there was a whole range of values that were implicit in the development effort and that were rarely, if ever, made explicit. Those values were and still are rationalist, secular, scientific and quantitative. Extended only very slightly, those values also become those of the individualist, the materialist and the consumer.
The issue of values has not been central to development debates. How could it be? The dominant Western belief in the inevitability of progress through advances in our science and technology bestowed a sanctity on the development effort. Religions focus mostly on how to serve their gods and not on their existence. To be perfectly fair, the development literature of the past 20-30 years does include references to cultural factors and value systems. But these are treated as "externalities", as matters to be dealt with in order to make the development model work. Much the same applies to economics which perceives and treats the environment as an externality or secondary factor.

Late last year, I had the privilege and the pleasure of attending a meeting in Washington at which Jacques Yves Cousteau spoke. He is, as we know, a great man of science. He is also today a very old man and somewhat frail. He spoke at a meeting of bankers, of scientists, economists and development specialists. Although his voice was not strong, reflecting his advanced years, his message was powerful. Speaking from the vantage point of a lifetime as a natural scientist, he reflected on what he had learned and on the future. He closed by saying that there was one lesson above all that his sojourn had taught him. It was that we must replace the dominant paradigm which has driven western society and most of the world for the past 50 years or face certain and irreversible disintegration. Then he went on to say that a new paradigm would have to be based on a re-discovery of values, the values of understanding, compassion and love.

Now these words, uttered in a roomful of bankers, scientists, social scientists and development types from the World Bank and IMF, evinced a visible nervousness. Uncomfortable glances were exchanged and people shifted in their chairs. This is not the language or the conceptual framework that we use in the professional circles of economic and social policy; it is not the language of development practitioners.

The words compassion, understanding and love are value words and, just as they created some discomfort when Jacques Cousteau spoke, they give rise to dissonance within many of us. I

confess to sharing in that dissonance because I don't know how to deal with those words in my professional life, in the practice of my trade. The words certainly don't fit our dominant paradigm; they don't fit our formal education and training; they don't correlate with the reward systems of our institutions, national and multilateral. And they are words that are easy to ridicule as "soft", "unscientific", "imprecise", or "emotional". It is small wonder, therefore, that their use in professional circles evokes dissonance.

As I said, at a personal level, I am not quite sure what to do with these value words. I have been involved in international development for 30 years and I head IDRC, a scientific organization, an organization whose mission is to apply research for development purposes. If I am asked -- as I was asked this morning in an interview on Radio-Canada -- what I have learned about development, and what we need to do differently in the future, dare I reply by using the words understanding, compassion and love? Would I be taken seriously? After all, IDRC is made up of PhDs and research is serious business, it being the stuff of science. And to talk about understanding, compassion and love is to talk, not about the stuff of science, but about the stuff of philosophy, the stuff of enlightenment. When social and economic thought, when development thought, expresses itself as Cousteau would have us do, it begins to sound more religious than secular, more intuitive than rational, more qualitative than quantitative and far more existential than scientific. In those shifts lies a lot of discomfort for scientific and professional organizations.

The dissonance notwithstanding, we must surely acknowledge that our secular faith in the inevitability of progress principally through advances in science and technology has been severely shaken. We know that advances in communication and information technology are giving rise to a westernized consumer/popular culture all around the world. Accompanying this trend, we see increasing evidence of deterioration in the collective bonds of community, kinship and the loss of traditional reference points of a spiritual and ideological nature. And we also see a growing reaction to this trend in the rise of religious fundamentalism, new religious sects, and in anti-technology movements of all kinds. There is also serious questioning of the desirability of development in most of the forms in which we have practiced it and known it over the past 50 years.

Increasingly, I am drawn to the realization that the science in which I was trained, the science of positivism and reductionism, looks at me and at each of us and sees the following: three buckets of water and a handful of minerals. Our science reduces us to that level in order to understand us. And our science is correct, because that is our physical chemistry: three buckets of water and a handful of minerals. The advantages and the advances that have been given to us by our science, our reductionism, have been enormous. The benefits of medical science, the unlocking of the DNA chain, the green revolution, and the promise of biotechnology are all given to us thanks to our reductionist science. Those advantages are clearly to be preserved and new investments are needed to bring about further advantages.

What Jacques Cousteau was telling us, however, was not merely that this is an incomplete view, but that unless this view explicitly incorporates values and is then guided by them, that we are headed in a dangerous direction. We may not be able to get off the hook, therefore, by asserting that values are as legitimate a form of intellectual inquiry as reductionist science or even that they are parallel and complementary. The point is that they are integral. The Chinese proverb holds that: "if we don't change direction, we'll get to where we're going". Far from being "anti-development", the integration of values into our thinking should lead us to re-defining development and equipping ourselves better to meet the challenges of human well-being in general.

John Evans recently reminded us of the importance of social capital. Drawing on a study by Robert Putnam on economic development and the quality of societies or communities in Italy, Evans stated:

> "Historical reviews in Italy suggest that communities did not become civil because they were rich, but rather became rich because they were civic..... The social capital represented by networks of civic engagements (and these are sports clubs, boys clubs, and having a community newspaper, having self-help groups, church groups) seems to be a pre-condition for economic development and effective government. A society that relies on generalized reciprocity and mutual assistance is more effective than a competitive, distrustful society. The network helps to overcome anonymity, cultivates reputation and builds trust of others through communication and interaction. Successful collaboration in one activity builds social capital connections and trust for other activities. The social capital is built from an investment of the time and caring of individuals: it does not deplete the public treasury."

Most conventional western discourse on development has been rooted in technocracy and this has led us to ignore or even to dismiss the cultural, moral and indeed spiritual dimensions of human well-being. We have dismissed these as either irrelevant to development or so intractably subjective as to be unamendable to our universal model, to that continuum on which all nations and all peoples were placed. Undeniably, major advances have derived from applying to development the dominant technocratic and "scientific" model of Western society. What is now increasingly recognized, however, is something that is not at all new, something that we always knew: that for most people in most parts of the world, basic attitudes and behaviour, and attitudes towards change, whether these be individual or societal, are not motivated -- at least not exclusively -- by economic or political interest beyond bare levels of survival or security. Most people and most cultures start at the other end of Maslov's scale. They are moved by deep underlying moral, spiritual assumptions about the reality they live in, and they reflect these in moral and spiritual assumptions. It is these realities -- realities that are manifest in myth and in ritual --that provide values that guide decisions about whether to change or not to change.

At one level, all of this is easy to acknowledge; at another, it creates dissonance because it is at substantial variance with our science, our institutions, the reward systems in which we work and the way in which we have approached development over the past five decades.

What this means is that if we are going to hold a serious conversation about values and to try to relate that conversation to development or sustainable development, then we are going to have to come to terms with the unfamiliar, including the place of words like understanding, compassion and love.

And any discussion of values and development should include something I have not mentioned until now. There have been at least two major attempts over the past fifty years to provide the world with universal values. The first is, of course, the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights. Remember that this did not exist before 1948. We are still trying to learn how to codify and deal with what that universal declaration really means and to determine the extent to which and how to put it into effect. The second universal declaration, the Rio Declaration, unlike the declaration of universal human rights which was an entirely new concept, involves more a return to values associated with periods in the distant past. Here we confront an attempt to declare a universal value in the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Attempts to codify and to put meaning into that declaration have scarcely begun."

In conclusion, the interpretation of values in the social, economic, political and institutional contexts of human activity, and their codification and application, is moving "onto the agenda". For industrial societies particularly, this is no small intellectual adjustment or modification, but a major shift to our dominant technocratic and secular belief system. It will require an unprecedented coming together of the efforts of communities and institutions which, as I have mentioned, have been moving in different orbits around the same world. A successful outcome cannot be taken for granted, but neither should we underestimate the critical importance of that successful outcome: that elusive, post-modernist concept "sustainable development" -- however different it may be defined by different actors -- depends on it.